don't tell me, I'll get Spock down here to find out telepathically."

That was pure bluff, but T'serek didn't know it. The faint hint of drama went out of his pose to be replaced by a rather desperate silence. Something caught Kirk's eye as he let the threat ride. He stooped and picked a pair of manacles out of the clutter. They were fleet issue, but he had never authorized their use on the Enterprise. Once the gleaming bands were secure around a man's wrists and the six-inch bar joining them locked his hands behind his back, he would be virtually helpless.

"Are these yours?"

"No, sir."

So that was what they had been up to. Knock him out, manacle him.... Kirk's gut tightened at the possibilities.

"This isn't the first time they've jumped you, is it?"

The boy wouldn't meet his eyes, but shamed spots of color showed on his cheekbones as he answered.

"No, sir."

So. The manacles clinked softly as Kirk dropped them in disgust. One thing more he had to know

"Did you ask for it?"

"No!" The gray eyes lifted, angry, steel hard. T'serek looked ready to come out of the chair and prove it. Good. Adrenalin loosens the tongue.

"The same thing has happened before, hasn't it--on your other ships?"

"Yes," the boy said defiantly, his accent stronger with emotion. "Since I came among your kind. Eyes stare me. Hands touch me. Men, women." Every line of the boy's body was hard and clear with anger. A flush ran up the strong column of his neck. The scent of combat stirred the air.

"Do you have something against sex?" Kirk asked sarcastically.

T'serek's smouldering eyes and parted lips denied it, but he said, "Yes. With animals." His gesture indicated the vanished assailants. "Need, need. Hating the body because it does not serve their need willingly. That is evil even among their own kind. And I am a Guthrie!"

Indignantly he smeared the blood on his chest with the heel of his hand, stressing the affront. Kirk could almost feel the sensation in his own palm--the sticky, slippery slide over firmness.... With an effort that brought the sweat prickling out between his shoulder blades, he wrenched his attention back to T'serek's words.

"Then you consider everyone on the Enterprise an animal."

Kirk's level tone was a contrast to the boy's impassioned declaration, and it deflated T'serek again. He rubbed the back of his wrist across his forehead and gave Kirk a badgered look. Kirk moved back, tacitly giving him permission to get out of the chair and move around.

T'serek paced the cubicle like a caged tiger, trying for words to explain himself. The scene took on a transient quality of deja vu for Kirk as he watched the controlled stalk of the ultimate, innocent predator. The boy's very incoherence testified to it. Only the young find it so important to be understood. Later the barriers of evasion, reservation, and withdrawal are welcomed against too ~~intimate~~ a knowledge. Later he would learn to focus that radiant sexuality, but he was innocent now. Dray was not to blame for the sunfired warmth of his hair or the clean line of cheek and jaw, the grace and strength of every stride.

Kirk let him walk it out, and finally the boy stopped pacing and faced him.

"Not--not animals. But not Guthries. If I loved, I would not speak, only stand ready to serve. And I would love what is worthy of love or not love at all. I must mate with my equal."

So young, thought Kirk. And oh, so vulnerable. He recognized his own impulse only as he spoke and heard his voice pitched low in intimate challenge.

"You don't find your equal here?"

He wanted the words, the tone, back the minute they were out, but they shot off at the speed of light across a great gulf that separated him from T'serek. All he could do was wait, seeing the color drain out of the boy's face, feeling the heat of his own blood pulsing in the small of his back

Across the room the boy's bare chest lifted in a deep breath and his eyes searched Kirk's as he yielded the truth that was in him.

"Not one," he said quietly. "Two. Two most worthy of love." The boy's intense voice was low, vibrating the air in the room, shaking the breath in Kirk's lungs. He paused fractionally, then said "Before I let my body shame them, I would burn it in the fire." For a long moment he held Kirk's eyes, then a little tremor shook him and he half turned away, head bent, awaiting judgement.

You asked for the truth, Captain. What do you have to match that? Nothing. Nothing he could say or do.

He started a comforting gesture but stopped it. Better not touch. His hands still held the silken head in memory.

"I'll take your word...for what happened here. See McCoy." He hesitated, then "See McCoy," he said again and left T'serek standing silent in the wreckage.

He entered it in the records as a fistfight and let it go at that. Lapsley put the fear into Nicholson, the ringleader of Dray's attackers, and while things eased up on Dray, Kirk was left to handle a new set of personal problems along with the series of border clashes, planetary contacts, and mechanical malfunctions that always increased with proximity to the neutral zone.

Kirk welcomed the increasing workload. The four Ixmahx planets were drawing the attention of private bounty hunters, Romulan freelancers (so they claimed in spite of the military cut of their cruisers) and God-knows-what on the prowl for a cache of probably nonexistant superweapons supposedly left behind by the Ixmahx forerunners who had terraformed (Ixmahxformed?) several worlds in this sector some thirty thousand years earlier. The Ixmahx world on which a culture still survived was priest-ridden and anti-technology, and ~~have~~ very reluctantly accepted the protection of the Federation three years ago, then cut off diplomatic relations, much to the chagrin of the negotiators involved. None the less it was still his job to protect Ixmahx against Romulan entrepreneurs.